

Guest Column

Why Affordable Housing Must Remain a County Priority

The Montgomery County Council today will host a discussion with a panel of national and local experts on new approaches to addressing the county's affordable housing crisis. The meeting begins at 2 p.m. in the council chamber in the County Council building, 100 Maryland Ave., Rockville.

Council President Steven A. Silverman (D-At Large) writes about the issue and its importance to residents.

By STEVEN A. SILVERMAN

A house is just not a house. A house is a home. It's where our infant son takes his first awkward steps. It's the treehouse we built in the back yard. And it's the place you first heard the news when a loved one passed away.

Our physical surroundings have a huge effect on how we develop and on our quality of life. That's why affordable housing is a critical issue. And, in Montgomery County, we have an affordable housing crisis.

We see it in our schools.

When immigrant children have no place to study, no place to play, and are crammed together in too little living space, there are consequences in the classrooms. When parents chase across the county, seeking to improve their housing situation, kids get moved out of one school and into another—changing friends and teachers and losing ground in their studies.

And we see it on our roads.

Since our starting teachers and firefighters and police officers—not to mention child care workers and retail employees—can't find affordable housing near their jobs,



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Tough choices ahead, Council President Steven A. Silverman says.

And we see the effects on public safety. Witness the tragic fire in Gaithersburg last January that took the lives of a Salvadoran family residing in a basement without any fire exit.

Montgomery County has long been ahead of the curve with our programs to build and preserve affordable housing. Our Moderately-Priced Dwelling Units—or MPDU—program is a widely admired model for communities across America.

Early on, this county saw the opportunity to make private development work for us—by requiring builders to include affordable units along with their market-rate offerings. And we had the foresight to spread MPDUs across the county into every community.

In 1989, the council established the Housing Initiative Fund. It has used \$47 million in public funds to leverage \$247 million worth

they move farther out and suck up the commute.

And we see how the lack of affordable housing affects young couples starting out without a whole lot of money and seniors who want to continue to live in the county they've done so much to build.

Of projects. Over the past four years, the council has increased our annual appropriations to the fund from \$2.7 million to \$15.5 million.

All this is great—but not nearly enough. As the county increasingly builds out—and development is concentrated more in urban in-fills—there are fewer MPDUs being produced. Many existing MPDUs are nearing their 10-year or 20-year expirations and could slip back into the market-rate category.

In the meantime, the market is driving up prices. The median price of a new single-family detached house is \$476,515. The median price of an existing single-family detached home now goes at \$303,000. The average rent in the county for a two-bedroom apartment is now \$1,180.

The Montgomery Housing Partnership estimates that 28 percent of renters in our county pay more than one-third of their income for housing. At the same time, 20 percent of our households in Montgomery County earn \$35,000 or less—up 14,000 families from 10 years ago.

I'm not about to "red line" any neighborhood in this county and say that the police and firefighters who protect our lives and property, the nurses who tend to our sick and elderly, and the child care workers who spend time with our kids can't live there.

That's not the kind of county I want to live in—and it's not the kind of county I'm going to live in.

So, what do we do? By all means, let's build on our MPDU program and do our best to keep those units in the affordable category.

Despite lean times ahead on the state and county level, we have to maintain our Housing Initiative Fund and fight to save the few state affordable housing programs that exist from being eliminated altogether. We need to use surplus land that the county already owns and give affordable housing a first priority for parcels that are appropriate, partnering with for-profit and nonprofit developers.

And we—who have been a model for others—need to look around at how other communities are tackling this challenge. For example, in San Francisco, the public sector stepped forward to develop an apartment building where apartments are reserved for teachers just starting out, and their families.

Today, I will convene an Affordable Housing Roundtable before the full council to pull together ideas from around the county and to examine and explore their relevance to our situation.

Everybody's for affordable housing—except that the devil is in the details. Developing affordable housing on county-owned land may mean that the vacant lot across the street is no longer available for other uses. It may mean your neighborhood is a trifle more dense than you'd like. Or that a small stand of trees you've grown accustomed to yields to the greater good.

We pride ourselves on process in this county—and that's a good thing. Still, there often are competing social goals and difficult trade-offs to be made.

If we are really serious about funneling our indignation over the shortage of affordable housing into action, we cannot shrink from making those hard choices.